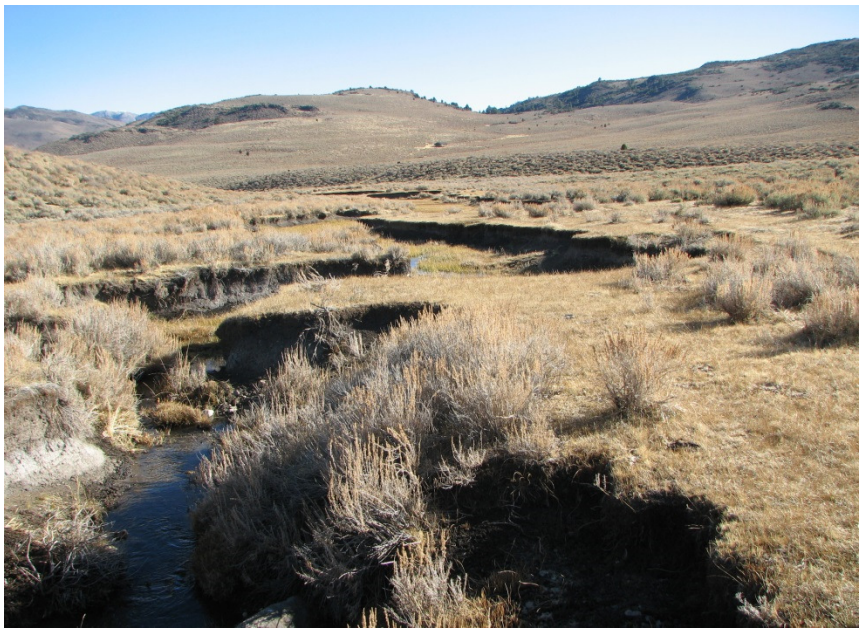
United States
Department of
Agriculture

USDA

Scoping Document

Wheeler Creek Habitat Improvement Project Bridgeport Ranger District, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Mono County, California

March 2014



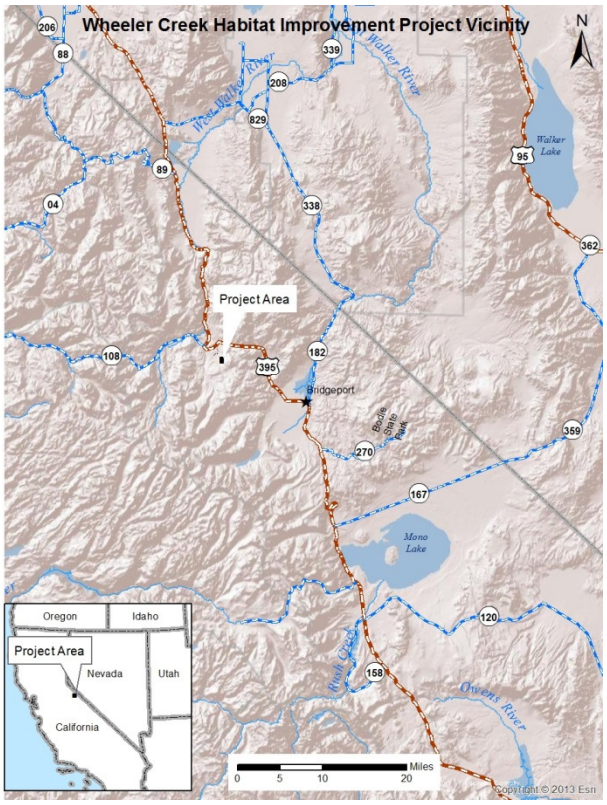
Comments Welcome

The Bridgeport Ranger District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest welcomes your comments on this proposal to improve Bi-State sage-grouse habitat through stream/meadow restoration in the Wheeler Creek area of the Bridgeport Ranger District (See project Vicinity Map).

The purpose of the scoping process is to solicit public comment early in the analysis.

The Forest Service, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Bridgeport Ranger District, has made a preliminary assessment that this proposed project falls within categories of actions listed in the Forest Service NEPA Handbook (36 CFR 220.6(e)(6)) that are excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and that no extraordinary circumstances exist that would preclude use of the category. The category is described as "*Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction*."

Written, facsimile, hand delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted. For detailed information on how to provide comments please refer to the "Comment Process" section of this document on page 5.



PURPOSE AND NEED

The meadow system adjacent to Wheeler Creek provides essential brood-rearing habitat for Bi-State sage-grouse and is important migration and summer range for the West Walker mule deer herd. Currently, Wheeler Creek and the adjacent meadows are not in proper functioning condition. Wheeler Creek is incised in several areas, and has eroding streambanks and headcuts. Continued channel incision is causing the water table to drop leading to drying of the meadow and a transition from riparian vegetation to more upland or dry land (xeric) species such as sagebrush.

The purpose of this project is to improve watershed condition in the Wheeler Creek area, which will improve the quality of priority habitat including essential brood-rearing meadows for Bi-State sage-grouse and other wildlife species. The need for this project is to address lowered water tables and meadow drying that is contributing to declining habitat quality for Bi-State sage-grouse and to address priority conservation actions from the Bi-State Action Plan (2012):

- Action HIR1-3-DCF: Continue to work with the permittees on Wheeler Flat to develop and implement grazing management strategies that reduce the impacts of early season grazing on key brood meadows in the Desert Creek-Fales PMU.

- Action HIR1-4-DCF: Continue to develop and implement an interagency restoration plan for Wheeler Creek to restore hydrologic function and increase forb cover and diversity on adjacent brood meadows in the Desert Creek-Fales PMU.

Ecological Objectives:

- Return Wheeler Creek to Proper Functioning Condition (PFC).

- Recharge meadow water tables.
- Increase riparian plant species diversity and cover.

- Meet or exceed Bi-State Greater Sage-Grouse Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) defined habitat objectives for brood-rearing/summer habitat.

    - Sagebrush canopy cover adjacent to riparian/meadow areas ≥ 10%.
    - Perennial forb canopy cover ≥ 15% in meadows and ≥5% in adjacent uplands.
    - Greater than 5 species of perennial forb present.
    - Within site capability, maintain a riparian/meadow perimeter to area ratio of 0.15 or greater.

Management Direction

This project is consistent with the Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1986), as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Record of Decision (2004):

- Manage riparian areas to achieve or maintain high ecological status.
- Give priority to range, wildlife habitat, and watershed improvement projects that will rehabilitate riparian areas that cannot be restored in a timely manner by other management techniques.
- Strive to achieve and maintain at least 90 percent of the natural bank stability for streams supporting Lahontan or Paiute cutthroat trout and 80 percent for all others.
- Capitalize on opportunities to resolve and preserve the natural and beneficial values served by floodplains; and to preserve, enhance, and manage the natural and beneficial values of wetlands.

In addition, the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Record of Decision (2004) also identifies riparian conservation areas around lakes and along perennial and intermittent streams, and directs management to maintain or restore the structure and function of aquatic, riparian, and meadow ecosystems.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Bridgeport Ranger District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is proposing to improve Bi-State sage-grouse habitat though stream/meadow restoration. The Wheeler Creek Habitat Improvement Project is located 12 miles northwest of Bridgeport, CA in Mono County. The project would improve approximately 1.5 miles of stream and 19 acres of meadow habitat along Wheeler Creek (See Proposed Action Map). The project area includes National Forest System and California Department of Fish and Wildlife managed lands and occurs within priority Bi-State sage-grouse habitat in the Desert Creek-Fales Population Management Unit (PMU). Legal description for the project area includes Township 6 N; Range 23 E; Sections 22, 23, 26, 27, and 35.

Wheeler Creek Meadow/Stream Restoration:
A restoration plan was completed for Forest Service and CDFW (California Department of Fish & Wildlife) managed lands in the Wheeler Creek area in 2013. Treatment measures identified in the plan may include bank sloping, installation of grade control and headcut structures, installation of step-pools, and re-vegetation with riparian species. The goals of the proposed treatments are to reverse meadow drying and loss of riparian species, reduce soil erosion, stop headcutting from progressing upstream, and improve water quality and temperature throughout the stream reach. No sagebrush would be targeted for removed within or adjacent to meadow areas to retain cover for

sage-grouse. The equipment necessary for implementation may include an excavator, backhoe or similar equipment, dump truck, UTV with trailer, and fuel truck. Materials used for implementation may include rock, soil, sod, native seed, and jute cloth. Re-vegetation with riparian species may be accomplished through seeding, planting bare root or containerized stock, and placing sod. Only native species would be used.

Enclosure Fence Extension: Enclosure fence is currently present along the portion of Wheeler Creek that is proposed for restoration. A small gap exists between fencing on Forest Service land and the recently built adjacent fence on CDFW land. The gap in fencing concentrates grazing impacts on a very small section of Wheeler Creek where grazing is not excluded. Approximately 107 feet of new fence would be constructed to eliminate the gap between the two existing fences. New fence would be constructed using t-posts and barbed wire, and would be marked to increase visibility for sage-grouse and other wildlife species. The enclosures would be used to allow recovery of Wheeler Creek after restoration treatments were implemented, and to maintain desirable vegetation conditions during the sage-grouse brood-rearing season (June 1st – September 1st).

Trough Installation: One new trough would be added to the existing East pipeline. Troughs present along the East pipeline provide watering opportunities in an adjacent pasture, but are not accessible from the treatment area. Adding a trough in the treatment area would provide a watering opportunity away from meadow areas and outside of the Wheeler Creek enclosures. Three potential sites were identified for trough placement. Only one site would be selected for trough installation. A concrete pad approximately 4 feet by 8 feet would be installed and the trough placed on top. A backhoe would likely be used to clear ground for the installation. Ground disturbance from the installation would not exceed 400 square feet.

Access: Mechanized equipment may be authorized to travel off established roads to access Wheeler Creek for restoration treatments.

DESIGN FEATURES

Heritage

- Archeological sites would be flagged and avoided during project implementation for the following activities: staging, off-road travel access by any mechanized equipment, bank sloping, grade control structure emplacement, headcut structure emplacement, mechanized re-vegetation methods, trough installation (including the pipe and a buffer area of a radius of 100' from the trough).
- Archaeological sites may be completely enclosed within any fenced exclosure as the preferred method of avoidance. Alternative measures may include reduction or expansion of the size of the exclosure or moving the fence to avoid archaeological site types that may be damaged by fence construction and cattle concentrations along the fenceline.
- Archaeological sites that are NOT eligible to the National Register of Historic Places might not be managed for protection.
- Testing or data recovery of archaeological resources would only occur if the resources cannot be avoided and are eligible or treated as if eligible to the National Register of Historic Places. At this time, no testing or data recovery is planned.

Wildlife

- Treatments will be timed to avoid potential destruction of migratory bird nests or young birds. If treatments were planned during the peak breeding season (May 15 –

July 15), a qualified biologist would survey the area prior to treatment to determine if nests are present. If nests or evidence of nesting are observed, a protective buffer would be delineated to prevent destruction or disturbance to nests until they are no longer active.
- Project implementation will not occur during the sage-grouse breeding and early/late brood-rearing seasons (March 1 – September 1).

Noxious and Invasive Weeds

- All equipment and vehicles would be washed prior to entering the project area to remove all mud, dirt, and plant material.
- Fill material such as rock and gravel used in restoration activities would be inspected before being used at the site to ensure its weed free.
- All seed used for restoration activities would be certified weed free.
- Project area will be monitored for a minimum of five years post-implementation to initiate early and rapid response should any new weed infestations occur.

Soil and Water

- No grazing will be allowed in restoration areas for a minimum of two years following implementation.
- Stream would be routed around reaches during construction to minimize impacts to water quality.
- Soil disturbed during stream restoration work would be re-vegetated.

COMMENT PROCESS

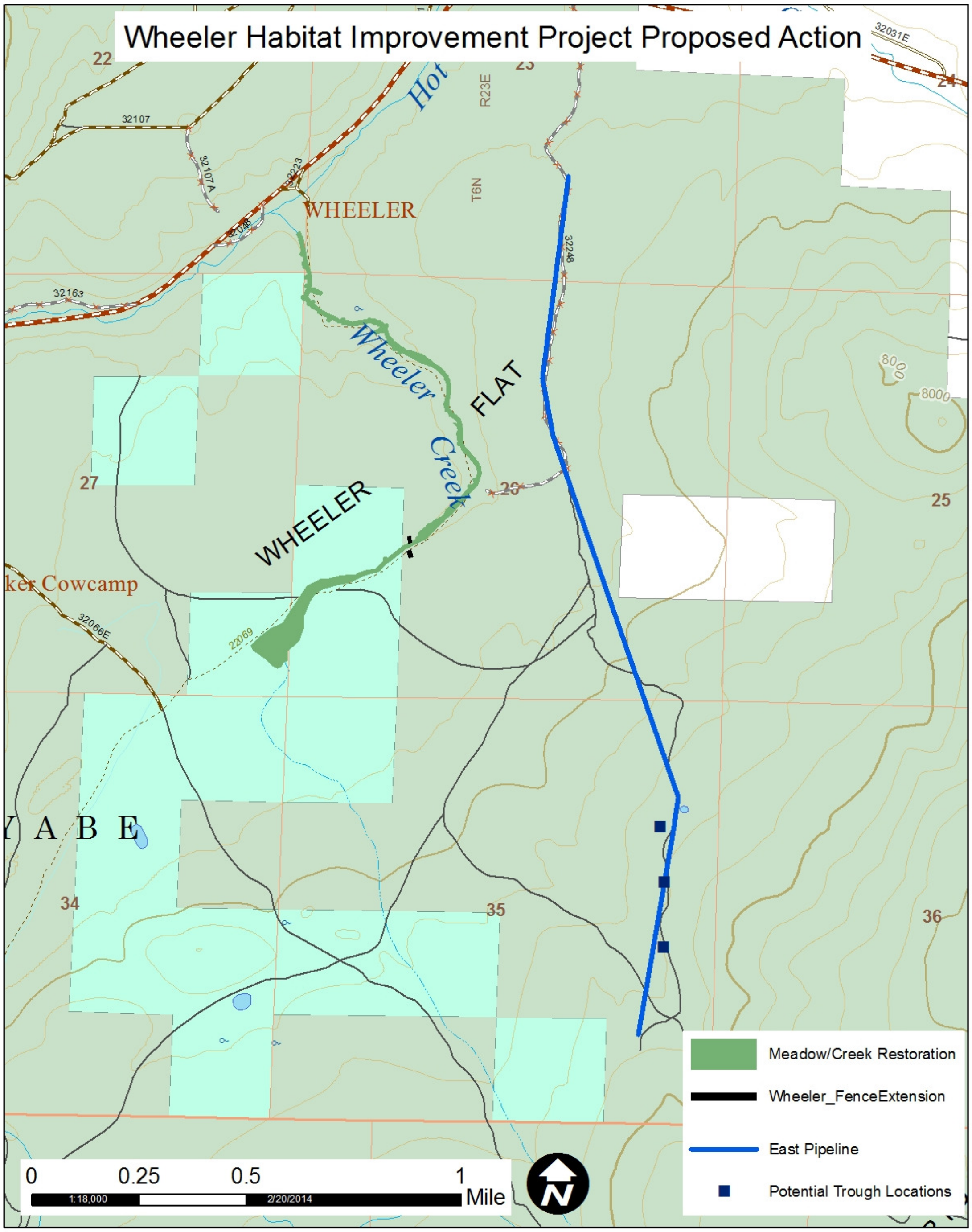
The Forest Service encourages your comments on this proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the responsible official should consider in reaching a decision.

Your comments will help us conduct the NEPA analysis for this project. Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted. Comments may be submitted to: District Ranger, Jeff Ulrich, Bridgeport Ranger District, Hwy 395 HC 62 Box 1000, Bridgeport, California 93517 fax (760) 932-5899. The office business hours for those submitting comments in person are: 8am to 4:30pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to: comments-intermtn-humboldt-toiyabe-bridgeport@fs.fed.us

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

For further information contact Joanne Lowden, Project Manager at (760)932-5853.


Wheeler Habitat Improvement Project Proposed Action
WHEELER
Wheeler Creek
FLAT
WHEELER
Cowcamp
A B E
22
23
24
25
27
34
35
36
R23E
T6N
32107
32107A
32163
32248
32066E
32031E
22069
8000
Meadow/Creek Restoration
Wheeler_FenceExtension
East Pipeline
Potential Trough Locations
0
0.25
0.5
1
Mile
1:18,000
2/20/2014